PHOTOGRAPHS: PRATYASHA BOLE

Twilight

BHAGWAN DADA, 88 NOT OUT

Clad in a checked *lungi* and vest, he sits at the only window in a squalid room. To a *namaste* and quick enquiry about his health, Bhagwan Dada laughs. *"Chalti ka naam gaadi."*

The veteran actor's spirit remains unfazed. Just over a month ago, he'd been bed-ridden with congestion which was playing havoc with his breathing. He'd been in no mood to meet, let alone talk, to a journo.

Even today whenever Dilip Kumar passes by my window, he stops his car and honks

Snow-white hair and thick spectacles give him the air of a benevolent old grandfather. As I sit across him, he reveals a 12-inch scar crossed with stitches on his left knee, the result of a fall some years ago. In a more recent mishap, he hurt his right hip which led to the swelling of his right foot. Can he move about? Bhagwan Abaji Palav, stoically points to a metal walker which aids mobility.

Although he doesn't suffer from any chronic diseases, age is catching up with him. "I'm so old now," he says. "When I move from one corner of the room to another. I forget why I went there."

His Dadar house where he lives with an unmarried daughter and the family of his youngest son Sachin, is typically middle-class. Two rooms have been partitioned off to afford some privacy. Sachin, who worked as an assistant cameraman for ad films, gave up his job two years ago to look after his father.

A veteran actor of 600 films, Bhagwan Dada also produced 27 films. In fact, he still entices audiences to sway to the tune of *Bholi surat dil ke khote* from his best-remembered film *Albela* (1950) every time it's shown on the TV channels.

Bhagwan Dada's unique semi-*bhangra* style of dancing is said to have inspired even Amitabh Bachchan and Govinda. Ask him whether he agrees and the veteran who completed 88 years on August 1, says, "They all copy me. But today's dances lack grace and variety. *Wohi naachna, wohi gaana. Bahut awaaz karte hain. Bheja ghuma dete hain.*"

He remarks that it's difficult to make out what the filmmakers are trying to say. "Today, more importance is given to the hero and heroine. In my time, the accent was on performances," he states.

A trifle reluctantly, he continues. "I don't know whether I should say this, but I feel that the girls of today are exploited. *Sabko nanga kar diya hai.* There's no *khaas baat* in any of the heroines I watch on TV today. *Hamara zamaana aur tha.*"

Son of a textile mill owner, Bhagwan Dada shifted to Mumbai from the Konkan. His love for the movies made him give up school after the fourth standard. He'd run off to watch a movie and invoke the wrath of his father.

The actor began his career in 1930, working in the stunt films of the silent era. He teamed up withthe legendary Fearless Nadia. In 1950, Raj Kapoor made him understand that the trend had shifted to social themes. To survive, he would have to make a different genre of films. Result: *Albela* with Geeta Bali which ran for 50 weeks.

Name, fame and money beyond his wildest imagination was his for the asking. But not for long. Followed *Labela* and *Jhamela* which failed miserably. His bungalow at Chembur as well as his fleet of seven cars had to be sold. The family moved to a chawl in Dadar.

All his friends disappeared, even the ones who'd shared

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his largesse and borrowed money from him. With the air of a man who's accepted what fate had in store for him, he sighs, *"Chhod dijiye. Maaf kar dijiye sabko."*

There's no anger in him at all. He admits he lost himself in the veritable jungle of showbiz. He's quick to add that his finances have never been so poor that his family has had to go without the basic necessities.

He points out that the Cine Artistes' Association has been sending him Rs 3,000 every month for the past six years. Just over two months ago, the Indian Motion Picture Producers' Association earmarked a monthly sum of Rs 5,000 for the ageing actor.

Apart from the monetary help, the Cine Artistes' Association also organises regular visits by Sunil Dutt, Johnny Lever, Satyen Kappu, Raza Murad and Ram Mohan. If they can't come over, they do call to enquire after Dada.

Getting nostalgic, Bhagwan Dada recalls, "There was a time when the top industry people were my friends; especially Dilip Kumar. Even today, whenever he passes by my window, he stops the car and honks. He moves on only after we've greeted each other." He tells me that industrywallahs of today respect and salute him on the odd occasion he attends a public function.

Then, folding his hands, he says, "It's been a long time since I spoke so much. *Bas, bahut ho gaya.*" He reclines on his bed, closes his eyes... to dream perchance of those good old magical days of the movies.

Meera Joshi